

SR0314

“And is Better than OR: Present and Seeking”

Psalm 95

John 3:1-7

I want to begin this morning with two scenarios. As you listen, see if these might sound familiar.

Scenario one goes like this. “Hey honey, can you go downstairs and get the tax stuff. We need to file.” “Sure, not a problem. Where are there?” “They are in the file cabinet. There is a folder listed 2013.” “No problem.” “Hey, honey I can’t find them.” “Are you looking in the file cabinet?” “Yes” “Are you looking under 2013?” “Yes” “are you sure?” “Yes, I am sure.” “Ok let me come down and look. You must not be looking in the right place.” “Oh, you are right. They are not here.”

Scenario two is a bit different. “Hey honey can you go downstairs and get the tax stuff?” “Sure, but I have just gotten home from work. I will get it after I exercise.” “Ok” “Hey honey, now that you are done exercising can you get the tax stuff?” “I will but the news is on and I want to make sure I don’t miss anything.” “Ok” “Hey honey, the news s done...” “I know but it’s dinner time. I promise to get them after dinner.” “Uh-huh” “Ok, dear...the tax stuff..” “It’s really late and I need to get to bed. I promise I will get it for you first thing in the morning.”

What we have before us are “or” scenarios. In the first scenario, the people are seeking but the object of their search is not there. In the second scenario the object of the search is probably there, but they are not seeking.” In this case if they want to get their taxes done, and is better than or...which sets us up for our two passages this morning which have to do with encountering God...where and is better than or.

Psalm 95 is our scenario in which God, the hoped for object of the search is present but the people are not seeking. The Psalmist begins with some of the most beautiful language describing God. God is the rock of our salvation. God is the King above all gods. God is the one who holds the seas, who formed the dry lands and who is our maker. We are the people of God’s pasture and the sheep of God’s hands. These words were and are a powerful reminder of God’s presence with the Hebrew people for a shepherd never leaves his or her sheep. The creator is always with creation. The problem, from the perspective of the Psalmist however, is that the people have decided that they do not have to seek God. “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah...when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though you have seen my work.” In other words the Psalmist says, you are like those people who would rather return to Egypt and the gods they thought they knew, rather than seeking and finding the God who had led them out of captivity. This God is present, but no one is seeking.

We move now to our John story in which we find someone seeking, yet God has not yet made God’s-self present in the person’s life. This is the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, meaning he was someone who sought to do what was right in the eyes of God. He had spent his entire life pouring over the scriptures in an effort to understand God’s will in the world

and in his life. He senses somehow, that there is something special about Jesus; that perhaps Jesus could tell him things he needs to know about God. So he goes to Jesus seeking to know more about God. Jesus' response to his seeking is both unnerving and insightful. Nicodemus cannot see what God is doing in and through Jesus because God has not yet opened Nicodemus' eyes. Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above," meaning that until God works in someone's life they cannot find God...in a sense God is not yet present to them. Like a game of spiritual hide and seek, Nicodemus can look but cannot as yet find because God, at least to Nicodemus, is not yet present.

My guess is that if we had our druthers, we would like "and" better than "or". We would like it better if God were present and we were seeking...in order that we find God and allow our lives to be changed. The good news is that God has promised to be present. Through the gift of the Spirit, God has promised not only that where two or more are gathered, there will God be. But God has also promised that if we seek we shall find, or if we knock the door will be opened. Once again, we can come to understand that God, like a shepherd is watching over all of God's people across the face of the earth. In a sense then that side of the equation is settled. What is left is our seeking, and this is at times the more difficult issue.

I say it is the more difficult issue because most of our lives are busy. We have things to do, places to be and people to see. We are always encountering distractions that consume our time from television to Candy Crush. It becomes easy then to allow God to simply be the anti-sin software that is running in the back of our lives. Just like anti-virus software runs silently in the background of our computers helping to keep us safe, we trust that that is where God is, running silently in the backgrounds of lives watching over us. But, as the Psalmist reminds us, God is so much more than that. God is the one who gives shape to our lives. God is the one who empowers us to new life. God is the one who desires to be in relationship with us. God is the one who longs to help us find our place in the kingdom. And all of this is only possible when we seek, when we look for God, when we make it and, and not or.

I realize that it is easy for me to say, go and seek God. So if we are going to have and rather than or, we may need some help. With that in mind I hope that you will take one of the handouts from the ushers as you leave. On them you will find a number of ways in which you can seek God...and truly make this an and which is better than an or.

My challenge to you then is for Lent, to choose one of these practices and makes it your own as you seek the God who is already present.

Handout

Worship – being in worship on a regular basis allows us to encounter God. We encounter God through music, the scripture read, preaching, prayer and the presence of others. A key to making worship a time of encountering God is to come with the expectation that God is there to be met; that God has promised that where two or more are gathered, God will be present.

Prayer – prayer is one of the primary ways in which God is encountered. For those for whom prayer is still a new practice, the simplest way to understand it is to see prayer as no more than a conversation with God. That being so, prayer is aided by choosing a regular time to pray, removing distractions and having a structure for the conversation. One simple structure is to think of prayer as ACTS. You begin with Adoration (praising God for God's creative work), Confession, Thanksgiving and the Supplication (asking God's assistance for yourself and others).

Fasting – fasting is not a weight loss program. It is a way in which people can set aside the usual order of their lives, in this case eating, in an effort to spend some extra time focusing on God. As you think about fasting please be clear as to your purpose, consult your doctor, begin slowly, let someone else know that you are fasting, choose an appropriate fast pattern (skip one meal day...or maybe two), set a definite length for your fast, be consistent, spend time in prayer and then reflect on what you have discovered.

Hospitality – though this may not seem like a way in which we can encounter God, Jesus made it clear when we show love to others and show them hospitality we are doing it to Christ himself. What this says though is that hospitality is not simply having our friends over, but making the conscious choice to be engaged with those we do not know and might not otherwise have a relationship with. In so doing we can begin to see God in and through them.

Sabbath – this is the practice of actually taking time to simply “be”. God made it clear that part of being human is taking time to relax and reflect on what God has done and is doing. We can practice Sabbath by avoiding technology, getting outside, nurturing our health, lighting candles and giving back to those who have given to us. Sabbath allows us to step outside of the usual routine in order to encounter God in the world in which we live.

Service – in Jesus Christ we see what it means to be fully human. That full-humanness consists of loving God and loving neighbor. When we love our neighbors, meaning doing for them, we are attuning our hearts to God's heart. We are imitating Jesus. In so doing God is made known to us not only through our actions but through the relationships that are built and the lives that are changed. Part of serving might be to choose a helping organization and give some volunteer time.